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ABSTRACT

A model based on the theory that classroom interaction and the political content of class discussion are the means to achieving a sense of political efficancy is tested on Canadian elementary students. Classroom participation, classroom politicization, sense of school efficacy, political knowledge, various personal characteristics, as well as sense of political efficacy are measured to ascertain their relative influences on the last variable. The results show class participation having no reliable affect. Personal characteristics, especially grade level, and classroom politicization do influence a student's accumulation of political knowledge. Grade level has an independent affect on school efficacy as, to a lesser degree, does political knowledge. The culminating influence of school efficacy out-weighs that of political knowledge in shaping a student's sense of political efficacy, and though the twc appear as the most important variables, the greater influence of school efficacy overwhelms the original hypotheses of the importance of classroom interaction. (JH)

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Classroom Practices and the Development of Political Efficacy*

by

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Implicit in the teaching of political subjects at the elementary school level are two assumptions: that political socialization begins at an early age and that it can and does take place in schools. Both assumptions are supported by previous research (Easton and Dennis, 1969). However, the mechanisms by which schools influence the nascent political beliefs of children, and the relative effectiveness of those mechanisms, are by no means clear. In this study, the effects of two aspects of elementary school programs on the development of children's sense of political efficacy are examined.

Political efficacy is seen as an individual's subjective feeling of political competence -- his belief that he can influence the political process, that governmental officials will be responsive to him, and that he has access to the channels of political power (Dawson and Prewitt, 1969). With reference to children's political efficacy, we are not concerned with perceived competence at the present time, but, rather, with the child's belief that the political system is responsive to the demands of ordinary citizens and that as an adult he will be able to influence the political process. Such beliefs are seen as an important aspect of the political socialization process, primarily because of the positive relationship between political efficacy and political participation in adulthood (Campbell, 1954, 1960; Harvey and Harvey, 1970; Form and Huber, 1971; Olsen, 1969).

Several studies indicate that at least a rudimentary sense of political efficacy develops during the early elementary school years (Hess and Torney, 1967; Greenstein, 1965; Langton and Karns, 1969; Easton and Dennis,

1969; Glenn, 1972). The mechanisms which cause its development, and in particular, the role of the school in this regard are poorly understood. Thus, for example, research has consistently indicated that a sense of political efficacy is strongly and positively correlated with schooling (Massialas, 1972). However, studies of the effects of social studies curricula, suggest that this aspect of schooling has little effect on political socialization (Ehman, 1969). One is left wondering, therefore, what it is about going to school which positively affects children's beliefs that, as adults, they will be able to influence the political process.

In this paper we propose and test a preliminary model which suggests that modes of classroom interaction, and the specifically political content of class discussions (rather than the social studies curriculum) affect children's sense of political efficacy. Data were collected from children and teachers in Toronto, Canada Separate (Catholic) Schools. Thus, in addition to political efficacy, this model contains the following component variables: school efficacy, political knowledge, classroom politicization, classroom decision making, and a set of student characteristics -- grade, sex, intelligence and socioeconomic status. In the following section, we discuss each of these components and present the model under evaluation.

A Model of School Effects on Perceived Political Efficacy

Political Efficacy

As noted above, a child's sense of political efficacy is defined as his belief that the political system is responsive to the demands of ordinary citizens and that as an adult he will be able to influence the political

process. A Political Efficacy scale, the dependent variable, was constructed by summing student responses to a series of seven Likert items pertaining to the political system. The two major dimensions of political efficacy tapped in the measure, government responsiveness and individual potency, are identified by Easton and Dennis (1969) as being at the heart of early learning about political efficacy. Five of the items are projective in nature, such as, "When I'm grown up my vote will be important in deciding what should happen in this country." Two items deal with the role of the ordinary citizen in the present tense, as "There's little use in writing to people in government, because they really aren't interested in the problems of the average person." Students were asked to respond to items on a 1-5 scale, with 1 indicating strong disagreement with the statement and 5 indicating strong agreement. Two items were written so that agreement indicated a feeling of inefficacy, and their scoring was reversed, so that a high score on the total Political Efficacy scale indicated a high sense of efficacy. Responses ranged from 7 to 35, with a mean of 22.41 and a standard deviation of 4.59. Cronbach's alpha was used as an internal consistency reliability measure and equalled .65.

School Efficacy

The first influence on perceived political efficacy which we wish to consider is that of children's sense of their own ability to affect events at school. Elementary schools represent children's first point of sustained contact with a large scale, bureaucratically organized social institution -- an institution characterized by a legal rather than traditional (to use Weber's terms) authority system. The school, in its organization and operation, is much more reflective of other social institutions and systems --

and in particular, the political systems -- than is the family (Dreeben, 1968). Thus, the school provides a setting in which children have many opportunities to attempt to exert an influence on non-family universalistic authorities and practices. Some children, we suggest, are successful in these attempts and come to perceive themselves as efficacious in school matters.

Feelings of efficacy developed towards the family, peer group, school or general environment may later be transferred or generalized to the political system. Douvan and Walker (1956) find a moderate relationship between personal competency scores and political efficacy scores. Similarly, Krause (1970) finds that a general sense of inefficacy is correlated with a sense of political inefficacy. These studies suggest that feelings of political efficacy may be, at least in part, the result of the transfer of feelings of personal competence with respect to other objects. Given the prominent role of the school in most children's lives, we expected it to be a prime source of attitudes in this transfer process. That is, we expected that children who perceived themselves to be capable of influencing school and classroom events would also believe that, as adults they would be capable of influencing political events.

School efficacy, a measure of the degree to which children feel they can influence what happens in their classroom was included in this model, in order to assess the magnitude of the relationship between this attitude toward the school and the analogous attitude toward the political system. It was measured by an index of five Likert items concerning the degree to which children felt they could influence the daily flow of events in the classroom. For example, one question read: "Often, I can get a teacher

to change her mind about something." Responses on the School Efficacy scale ranged from a low of 5 to a high of 25, with a mean of 16.01, a standard deviation of 3.66 and an alpha of .62.

Political Knowledge

Effectiveness in the political system depends in part upon knowledge of how the system operates. While a high level of knowledge is not sufficient to insure effectiveness, it is necessary. This relationship also seems to exist between political knowledge and the belief that one can or will be able to be politically effective.

In contrast to other studies ostensibly considering children's political knowledge, we were not concerned with the types of knowledge usually contained in elementary social studies curricula. As Goldstein (1972) has shown, such curricula seem to be primarily concerned with inculcating feelings of love and loyalty to the country; relatively little factual information is presented (and much of the latter is presumably historical in nature, which the child may perceive as having no connection to present day political events). Thus, we reasoned that the formal elementary social studies curriculum would have little effect on political efficacy, just as the secondary school curriculum has been shown to have little effect in other political socialization studies (Ehman, 1969; Litt, 1963). However, some teachers deliberately and regularly bring current political events and issues into the classroom discussions. In those classrooms, we expected that children would acquire, in addition to the more normative material noted by Goldstein, a greater factual knowledge about the operation of the existing political system than they would in classrooms whose teachers

adhered more closely to textbooks and curriculum guides. This specific knowledge about politics and politicians, we reasoned, would in turn positively affect political efficacy.

Certain qualifications are necessary. Clearly the nature of the political system and the actual political power of the ordinary citizen is relevant. Harvey and Harvey (1970) find that understanding the political system is negatively related to political efficacy in college students, suggesting that certain political realities tend to decrease efficacy. Furthermore, factual political data is often acquired in an atmosphere contaminated by emotional bias and prior attitudes, so that the same data may contribute to different orientations for different people. These qualifications notwithstanding, political knowledge in elementary school children is expected to be positively related to a sense of political efficacy, especially since the absolute state of knowledge is expected to be somewhat superficial as well as somewhat idealized. Political Knowledge was measured by asking children to respond to twelve multiple choice questions concerning the government and its operation; a child's score on this variable became the number of these questions he answered correctly. The mean score on this variable was 7.53 with a standard deviation of 3.22.

To this point we have posited a three-variable system in which the two primary determinants of a child's perception of his potential political efficacy are how efficacious he feels in regard to the school and his knowledge of the political system. We next considered classroom practices which might affect this system. In examining school practices potentially affecting political efficacy (either directly, or indirectly through their effects on political knowledge and school efficacy) we focused on two mechanisms --

participation in classroom decision making and classroom politicization.

Participation in Classroom Decision Making

Although the school is not a political system, teachers often draw analogies between student participation in decision making and voting in classroom elections and their counterparts in the political system. Participation in some of the procedures of a democratic political system may lead students to feel that they are participating in a segment of that political system. Thus, a rationale commonly advanced for encouraging student participation in classroom decision making is precisely that is represents a form of democracy which is also characteristic of adult political life. Form and Huber (1971) suggest that participation in political activities leads to higher feelings of political efficacy. Although this is the reverse of the usually assumed causal relationship between the two variables, it indicates the relationship that may exist between classroom participation practices and political efficacy. Further, Almond and Verba (1963), in a massive study of adults in five nations, find a significant correlation between remembered participation in school decisions and subjective political competence, which tends to support this reasoning. Thus, participation in classroom decisions may directly effect children's perceptions of their potential political efficacy.

In addition, however, it also seemed reasonable to expect that participation would have an indirect effect on political efficacy, by heightening children's perceptions of their own influence in regard to school matters. That is, we reasoned that participating in classroom decisions would directly effect children's perceptions of their ability to influence school matters (i.e. School Efficacy) which would, in turn, effect their Political Efficacy scores.

The extent to which children participated in classroom decisions (Classroom Participation) was measured by summing teachers' responses to four Likert questions concerning the degree to which they allowed children to participate in making routine classroom decisions, such as, "How frequently do the children choose the content of lessons?" Teacher responses ranged from a low of 7 to a high of 19, with a mean of 16.57 and a standard deviation of 3.22. All students in a particular class were assigned the same value on the participation variable, identical with the teacher's response score.

Classroom Politicization

A second aspect of schooling which may affect the development of political efficacy in children is the degree to which political events occurring in the society regularly form a part of the classroom curriculum. That is, in addition to the usual social studies curriculum to which all students are exposed, some teachers regularly incorporate local and national political events in their classroom discussions. Some also simulate national elections in their classrooms, complete with candidates, party identification, campaign speeches and final balloting. In these "politicized" classrooms, children may develop a greater sense of their potential political efficacy, to the degree to which these discussions are supportive of the concept. Thus, political discussions and mock elections may influence political efficacy through the creation of a politicized environment. This reasoning is supported by Langson and Karns (1969), who find a relationship between participation in a politicized school atmosphere and political efficacy, primarily in the low to middle efficacy range.

A politicized environment, however, may also have indirect effects on political efficacy through its effect on political knowledge. That is, dis-

cussing political subjects and holding mock elections would presumably increase students' factual political knowledge and thus increase their sense of political efficacy.

We measured the extent to which teachers involved their classes in discussions and simulations of political events (Classroom Politicization) by asking each teacher four questions concerning the extent to which they engaged in these activities. Three of these questions were in a Likert form, and concerned the frequency of classroom discussions of political events, the fourth concerned holding mock elections to coincide with the national elections. (Data were collected shortly after such elections.) Teacher responses ranged from a low of 4 to a high of 14 with a mean of 9.24 and a standard deviation of 2.61. As with Participation, all students in a particular class were assigned the same value on the variable.

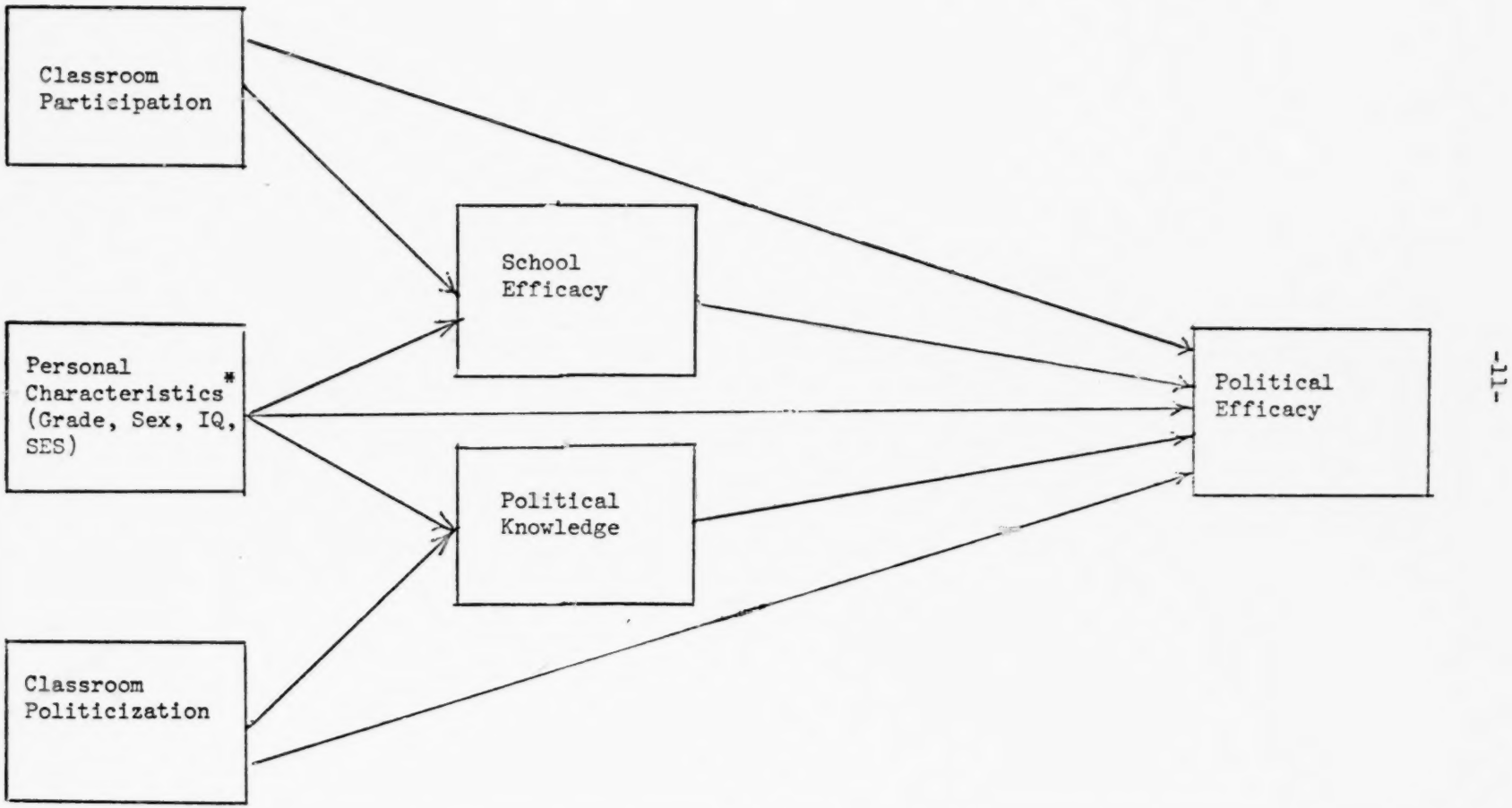
Personal Characteristics

Several personal characteristics thought to be relevant to political efficacy were also included in the model. These characteristics include IQ, school grade, sex and SES. On the basis of previous research findings (White, 1968; Easton and Dennis, 1967; Lyons, 1970) it was predicted that IQ, SES, and grade level would be positively related to political efficacy. Intelligence, scored on a five point scale, was taken from school records. Parental socioeconomic status (SES) was measured on a two point scale based on children's reports of their fathers' occupations.

Classroom Participation and Politicization, as well as student personal characteristics were treated as exogenous variables -- predetermined and caused or initiated by factors outside of the set under consideration. They are seen as affecting Political Efficacy both directly and indirectly,

Figure 1

Hypothesized Path Model for Classroom Effects on Political Efficacy



*The personal characteristics are grouped together in order to simplify the graphic presentation. In the statistical analysis they are handled separately.

through their effects on School Efficacy and Political Knowledge. On the basis of the theoretical formulations presented above, a causal ordering among the variables was postulated and is represented in Figure 1.

Methods

The questionnaire data for this study were collected in Toronto, Canada in 1968. Respondents were 1341 elementary school children in grades four, six and eight in the Toronto Separate (Catholic) schools. Seventeen schools were drawn randomly from among the total number of schools in the district. In schools where there were several classes at a given grade level, one class was randomly selected. Questionnaires were administered to all children and their teachers in these classes. In the fourth grade questionnaires were read aloud to the children; in the fourth and six grades the questionnaires were administered in two or three sessions. The seventeen schools in the sample represent a cross section of socioeconomic neighborhoods. Since nearly all children were Catholic, religion was in effect held constant, thus limiting the generalizability of the study. The zero order correlation matrix among the nine variables is presented in Table 1.

The validity of the model depicted in Figure 1 was tested using path analysis. Path coefficients were computed for a fully identified version of the model, with unidirectional causal flow and no untested or reciprocal

Table 1: Zero-Order Correlation Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Political Efficacy	1.00	.35	.25	-.02	.02	.19	-.02	.10	.10	22.41	4.59
2. School Efficacy		1.00	.15	.03	.04	.19	.03	.03	.03	16.01	3.66
3. Knowledge			1.00	-.03	.22	.61	-.17	.34	.24	7.53	3.22
4. Participation				1.00	-.08	-.06	-.02	-.09	.00	16.57	3.22
5. Politicization					1.00	.13	-.01	.12	.13	9.24	2.61
6. Grade[1]						1.00	.04	.14	.03	1.98	.82
7. Sex[2]							1.00	.00	-.03	1.52	.50
8. IQ[3]								1.00	.19	3.72	1.29
9. SES[4]									1.00	1.34	.48

[1]Grade 4 was scored as 1, grade six as 2, and grade 8 as 3

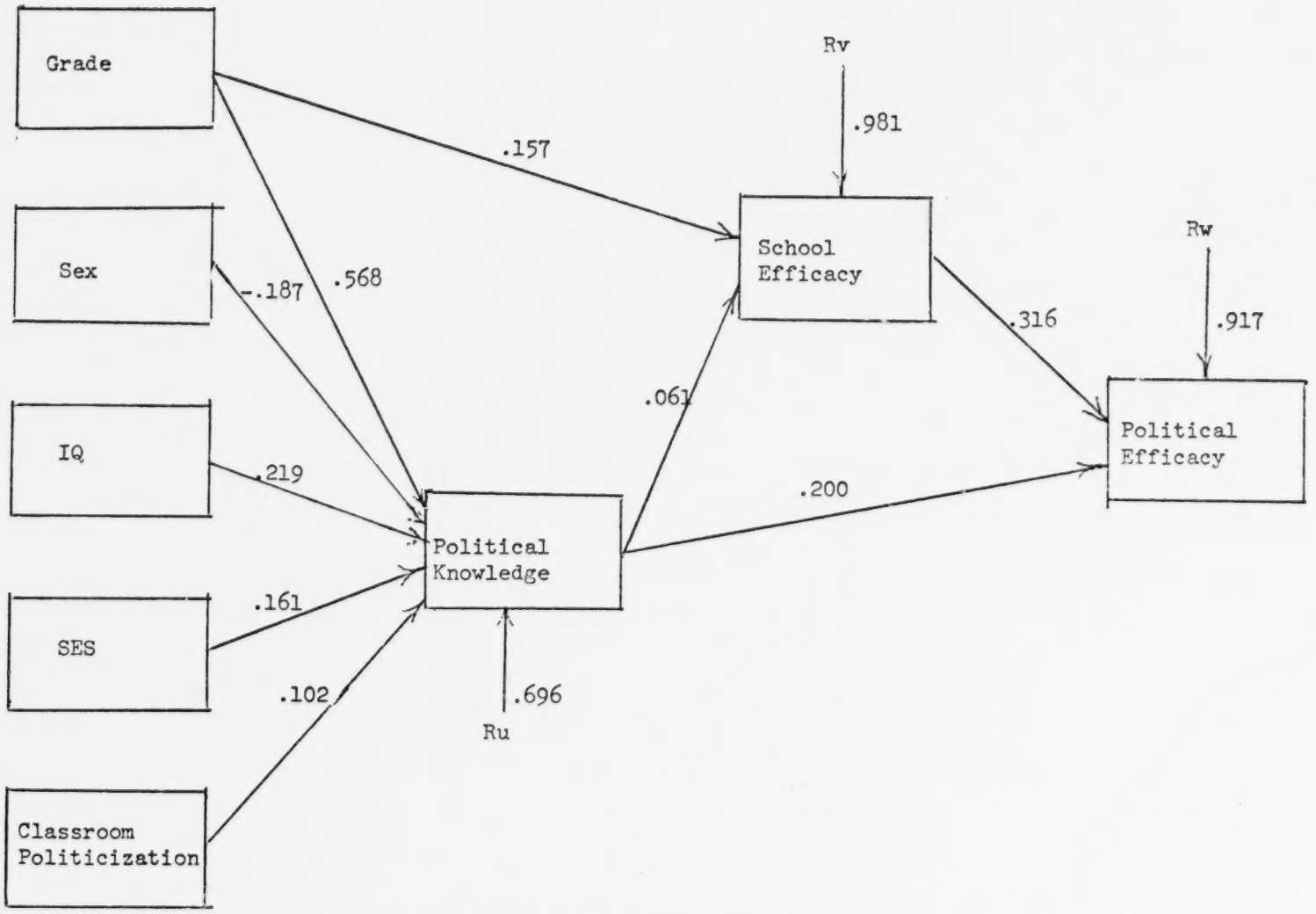
[2]Males were scored as 1, females as 2

[3]IQ was measured on a 5 point scale, with 5 indicating the highest IQ

[4]SES was measured from student reports of father's occupation, with 1 indicating blue collar and 2 white collar

Figure 2

Empirically Obtained Path Model*



*Note: Classroom Participation was dropped from the final model because all path coefficients were below .05.

links among the endogenous variables. Each path coefficient reflects the magnitude of the direct or [illegible] effects of that particular variable on the dependent variable with the other independent variables considered simultaneously in the multiple regression equation. Paths with coefficients approaching zero were deleted from the model.[1] A deleted path, Pij, indicates that the total effect of Xj on Xi is indirect, via Xj's effects on other independent variables. Path coefficients were then recomputed for this trimmed model, which is presented in Figure 2.

These path coefficients were then used to reconstruct the zero-order correlation matrix as a test of the mathematical accuracy of the derived model. If the deleted paths were truly nonexistent, the regenerated matrix should conform to the empirical matrix with little error. The largest discrepancy between the two matrices was .04, below the .05 criterion suggested by Spady and Greenwood (1969). Thus, the derived model appears to be an adequate mathematical representation of the original data matrix.[2]

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[1] There is no established criterion for determining when a path is nonexistent. In this case paths were deleted if their Beta weights in the original model were less than .050.

[2] Since the magnitude of the direct and indirect effects depend upon the causal ordering assumed to be valid at the onset, path analysis cannot be used to prove causality. The results can only be used to substantiate the model justified on theoretical grounds or to reformulate it if the model is incompatible with the results.

Results

Turning to the substantive findings of the research, we would make several points. First, at least a rudimentary sense of political efficacy has developed even in the lowest grade studied. Response rates are high (i.e., few children chose the "don't know" response) and there is significant variation in the content of the responses from high to low efficacy. For instance, while 37.4 percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "When I'm grown up, I can help decide what the government will do," 31.3 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with it. Similar results were found for the items in the School Efficacy construct.

Second, it seems clear from Figure 2 that the aspects of schooling included in this study -- political discussions and participation in classroom decision making -- have no direct effect on the development of a sense of political efficacy in children. Rather, a child's sense of his own efficacy vis a vis the school, and his own knowledge of how the political system operates, are the most important determinants of his perceptions of his potential political competence. Of these two variables, School Efficacy is relatively more important.

The effects of Classroom Politicization on Political Efficacy are entirely indirect via its association with the other variables, in particular, Political Knowledge. The effects of participation in classroom decisions on both Political Efficacy and School Efficacy, were so insignificant that it was dropped from the final path model.

Thirdly, of the exogenous variables, Grade Level is clearly the most important. Grade Level has indirect effects on political efficacy via both political knowledge and school efficacy. Similarly, Sex, IQ and SES, all of which are known to be related to political efficacy in adults, appear to

have these effects only indirectly through their links with Political Knowledge for elementary school children.

Discussion

In the beginning of this paper we pointed out the issue raised by two streams of political socialization research that have considered schooling and education -- that increasing educational levels appear to result in greater perceived political efficacy, while exposure to social studies curricula in schools seems to have little if any effect. This study suggests that both of these generalizations may be correct. That is, this research indicates that schooling may heighten children's beliefs that as adults, they will be able to influence the political process, but that these beliefs result from generalizing similar beliefs about the school itself and from specific factual knowledge concerning the political process. In the first instance, mechanisms involved in the perceived ability to wield influence in one institution, the school, generalizes to a belief in one's ability to influence political institutions. In the second, the association of political knowledge with political efficacy indicates that the greater the child's knowledge of the political system, the greater his belief that he can influence it. Thus, the school seems to have the potential to develop realistic political expectations in its students, principally through the transmission of accurate and relevant political knowledge.

If the study succeeds in shedding some light on this issue, that light also brings other issues into view. First, we were unable to explain what causes some children to believe they can influence events at school. Thus, if one believes that it is desirable that the young in a democratic society accept the idea that as adults they will be able to affect the political system (See Easton and Dennis, 1969, for such an argument), and that this may be at

least partly done by fostering the development of feelings of personal efficacy in the context of the classroom, we remain unclear about how the latter is to be accomplished. The commonly accepted notion that encouraging "participatory" classroom management will automatically lead to heightened school efficacy is cast in some doubt by this study. Children in classrooms whose teachers report more extensive attempts to involve them in decision making scored no higher on our School Efficacy measure than did children not in such classrooms. There may be several reasons for this.

First, perhaps only the youngest children see student participation in most classroom decisions as meaningful, while their older and more perceptive peers see it as relatively trivial in comparison with the more important decisions routinely reserved by teachers to themselves. In some respects, such an outcome is quite likely, and the end result of participative classrooms management may well be to lower classroom efficacy rather than raise it. That is, classrooms and schools are not political entities (despite the rhetoric to the contrary); they are formal organizations replete with well defined roles, a steep gradient of authority, and a set of goals and objectives set by higher authorities and the community itself. Thus, teachers themselves cannot (and some would say should not) be free to set important organizational goals and practices, and hence they cannot allow their students to participate in doing so. Instead, it might be argued that, under the impetus of a misunderstood ideology of democratic schools, teachers institute the trappings of democracy without its substance, allowing their students to participate in (or make) relatively trivial decisions, while organizational realities constrain them to withhold more important decisions

to themselves. If this line of argument is correct, participatory decision making as it may be practiced in many classrooms may result not in an increased sense of student efficacy but in resignation and, in a few cases perhaps, cynicism.

A second possibility for the lack of relationship between Classroom Participation and School Efficacy may be that even when students are allowed a great deal of freedom in making decisions, only a few wield any influence in that process. That is, if many classrooms are characterized by a small student elite who do in fact influence decisions perceived as important, the majority may still be relatively uninvolved and hence their perceived efficacy may be unaffected. For them, participation in classroom decision making may consist primarily of raising their hands to cast a vote at the close of a discussion led by the few. For this majority "participation" may not affect perceived efficacy at all. Further, for those who consistently attempt to wield influence and fail, participatory classroom management may decrease their perceptions of their capability to influence classroom events.

We conclude that the effects of participation in classroom decisions in the development of political efficacy are not as clear-cut and as obvious as they are sometimes assumed to be. Theoretical and empirical refinements that take into account classroom circumstances, the nature of the decisions made, the organization in which they occur, and student personality dispositions, are necessary. The small but significant path from grade to school efficacy seems to indicate that increased experience with schools results in slightly increased perceived effectiveness in dealing with teachers and school procedures. Finally, while the school practices studied had little

effect on school efficacy, it is also clear from the distributions on the items which made up the scale that a large number of students feel efficacious with respect to the school.

With regard to the other variable which seems to influence Political Efficacy, Political Knowledge, our findings lead us to somewhat more sanguine considerations. Again, assuming the desirability of giving children a conception of their potential political efficacy, the influence of factual knowledge in this regard is important. First, in contrast to the teaching of attitudes (e.g., School Efficacy) schools are relatively more effective in teaching children factual information. Thus, it is relatively easy to give even rather young children the information they need to understand the role of major political authorities and thereby increase their sense of political efficacy. At the same time, factual information regarding the operation of the political system avoids the potential danger involved in the present social studies curricula which carry a heavy normative load. That is, the often astonishingly idealized image of country and government presented in the common textbooks and curriculum guides (Goldstein, 1972) may lead to disillusionment and cynicism as students get older and become acquainted with the realities of political life. This may account for the decrease in feelings of political efficacy which Harvey and Harvey (1970) found among college students. These students, engaged in serious study of political issues (and often involved in those issues) confront for the first time the very real constraints on an individual or group attempting to influence the outcomes of a political process.

A second point we would note is that sex, intelligence and socioeconomic status were found to have only indirect effects on political efficacy, via

their effects on political knowledge. This finding suggests that it may be possible for the school, through a deliberate policy of implementing realistic political education courses, to offset some of the negative effects of being female, lower status, or of lower intelligence so commonly found in the studies of political efficacy among adults. That is, these data suggest that the reason women (for example) consistently score lower on political efficacy research is that they know less about the operation of the political system, and that the school might be able to overcome at least part of this disadvantage.

Grade level had by far the largest effect on Political Knowledge and it was the only variable in the model to affect school efficacy. In regard to the latter, it seems probable that its effect is primarily the result of increased experience with the school; as children gain experience with the organization and its operations, their perceived ability to influence events in the classroom may also increase. In regard to its effect on Political Knowledge, several interpretations are possible. It may be that the Grade Level effect is partly a result of maturational factors, whereby increased political knowledge results from the increased complexity of children's cognitive structures and the resulting capacity to grasp relatively abstract ideas concerning government. Similarly, its effect may be partly an indirect effect of the formal school curriculum, which at the highest grade level we sampled (8th) contains some material on government. That is, classroom discussions of Canadian history and government may sometimes lead to discussion of current political events. (It should be remembered that our Political Knowledge items were primarily designed to tap knowledge about present authorities [e.g., the Toronto mayor], and hence would not be learned from textbooks.)

Another possibility is that older children are exposed to a greater number of political messages from the mass media (although a preliminary investigation of this possibility, not reported here, does not seem to support this interpretation).

The effects of Classroom Politicization on Political Knowledge are relatively small -- the path coefficient was only .102. Nevertheless, when it is remembered that even in classrooms scoring high on this variable, only a very small proportion of classroom time over the course of a year could have been devoted to discussions of politics, the effect seems to us to be substantively important. (All of this time was, in effect, "bootlegged" into the classroom in lieu of some aspect of the regular curriculum.) This finding certainly suggests that were elementary schools to implement a specific curriculum concerned with the study of politics, the effects on children's political knowledge would undoubtedly be large, with resultant larger effects (indirectly and, perhaps, in those circumstances, directly) on Political Efficacy.

The small path coefficient linking Political Knowledge to School Efficacy was unanticipated in the hypothesized model. It is possible that Political Knowledge is serving as an indicator of general knowledge or subject matter competency in this relationship, which in turn may characterize children who perceive themselves to be efficacious in regard to adults.

In conclusion, the relationship between the two classroom practices studied and political efficacy is not as straight forward or as strong as originally anticipated. Linear relationships, with increased participation and politicization leading to increased political efficacy were hypothesized based on the common, rather idealized image of the processes involved. Instead, these processes seem to be interacting with other aspects of the school en-

vironment as well as individual student differences to produce complex results. With respect to the relationship between participation, school efficacy and political efficacy, students may be forming not an idealized, positive expectation of political efficacy, but rather a more limited, realistic expectation. We could account for only a relatively small proportion of the variance in Children's Political Efficacy scores. This is hardly surprising, given the restricted range of variables under consideration. Nevertheless, our results do indicate that elementary schooling does have an influence on even young children's perceptions of their potential ability to influence the political system, and that these effects are at least partly the result of their perceived ability to influence events at school and of the knowledge of politics which they gain there.

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